

INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

by Tom Bowles

First impressions are important. There is no denying it. Whether it's the first time you 'meet the parents', an initial job interview, or the first time you test drive a new car, that first impression sticks with you. The B4 is no exception, and its unique styling certainly makes a bold opening statement. But it demands a long look, and not a snap judgment. Upon seeing the Henman-Bevilacqua display and instruments at Winter NAMM, the first thing I was reminded of was art deco styling, and then the minimalist art movement. Next up, it struck me as some kind of industrial tool. Then, as I studied the looks of the B4, I was reminded first of the classic Danelectro designs. Shortly thereafter, my mind strayed to thoughts of Fenders, and yes, even Gibsons. Like I said, it demands a long look, and a first impression that keeps on impressing (for better, or for worse).

After playing one of the B4's and talking to Scotty at NAMM (thanks again, Jaquo, for leading me to their booth!), I knew I wanted to review one for the magazine. When the test bass arrived, I was pleased to find a nice surprise before I even got the bass out of its case. The sturdy, stylin' aluminum case is a departure from the more mundane black cases so prevalent in the market, and it demands attention in its own right (I dig it a lot). Opening it up, I found not only the hella cool B4, but also a set of nice drivers for the various adjustments, and a cool black strap.¹ So yes, this bass and its accoutrements make strong visual impressions. But as strong as the initial visual impression may be, this Hen-Bev has a few more tricks up its sleeve.

TREAT THY NEIGHBOR WELL

Neighbors are like dice. You never know how they'll roll. Sometimes, Lady Luck smiles on you, and some times it's snake eyes. Apparently, Scotty Bevilacqua and Graham Henman both had a good roll back in 1990 when the two of them became neighbors (in Pennsylvania) and great friends. This friendship

gained another dimension when Graham met Paris a few years later, and all three got along famously. Scotty eventually moved to Seattle, and then California, but they stayed in touch. After Scotty started building his own line of guitars, he built a guitar for Graham and Paris' son, Stone Henman, on his 7th birthday.² The following Christmas, the three friends – a woodworker (Scotty), a director (Graham), and

HENMAN BEVILACQUA

a fashion designer (Paris) – had an epiphany over dinner and drinks (ah yes, the mother of invention!) The three discussed how great it would be to produce guitars that had style, elegance, and soul, and things just kept moving forward from there. This unique combination of skills and experiences caused each of them to grow in directions they might not have considered without the others' influence. Their initial prototypes were aimed at rock guitar players (the S1 model), surf guitar players (S2) and bass players (the B4).

WHO NEEDS STRESS?

Remember that first impression I talked about? Well, the B4 finds a way to speak in not one, not two, but three 'first impressions.' The first was visual, but the second is more tactile in nature. The 'feel' of this bass is certainly notable as an experience unique from its looks. The 'stress-free' neck is a major part of this. This style of construction was pioneered by Dave Bunker, with whom Scotty

1. A thorough manual will also be included by the time you read this.
2. Stone Henman is featured in several of the Henman-Bevilacqua ads.



HB



Bevilacqua has worked with in several different capacities.³ The idea being to take the stress off of the neck and fingerboard and to transfer it, instead, to a metal bar attached to the headstock, run down the center of the neck, and then bolted to the body. This bar carries all the stress, leaving the neck and fingerboard free from such forces. Why go to this effort? According to Scotty, in addition to providing enhanced neck stability and consistency, it also aids in sustain and resonance.⁴ In practice, this makes for a very lively feeling neck (the vibrations are notably stronger than what you feel with a conventional neck), with almost non-existent dead spots (and while not the only factor, I am sure that the stress-free design contributes to this). One aspect of this design is that it does not utilize a truss rod, per se. In fact, you have an entirely different manner of adjusting action and relief. The individual bridge pieces have height and tilt adjusters (accessible from the rear of the bass) There is a tilt adjustment control set amidst the neck bolts, and there is a small access hole on the side of the neck which allows you to adjust the relief of the neck itself. The bridge has an attractive, removable brushed aluminum cover. As further evidence of the Henman-Bevilacqua commitment to sonic fidelity, if you suspend the bass bridge from a string and strike it, you'll discover that it is tuned to 'F#'. The truss bar is tuned to 'G'. Scotty's theory is that an instrument's purpose is to make music, and all of the components going into an instrument should be inherently musical in their own



right.

Speaking of those pickup covers, they are easily removed, and underneath lie – somewhat to my surprise – a pair of EMG Hz pickups. The reason for my surprise is that this is a relatively low-budget pickup, and not necessarily what you would expect from an instrument in this price range. When I asked Scotty about his choice of this pickup, he informed me that it, too, was chosen for its sonic performance (and he adds that these pickups spec out very well in his lab testing). But he was quick to add that, being a custom instrument, if a customer were to request an alternate pickup choice, he could easily accommodate such a request.

Some of the initial models (this test bass included) featured an 'open grain' finish. This finish is rather unique, and makes a strong impression of its own. It certainly accentuates the 'art deco' feel, and again evokes this thought of a modern reinterpretation of a vintage design. However, it does not appear to be the most durable finish (though according to Scotty, scratches and marring are easily repaired). For this reason, they will be using glossy finishes (in both solid color and translucent grain) in the near future, though they may revisit the open-grain finish further on down the road, if they can establish the requisite durability.

The access to upper the upper register is superb, and overall, this is a very, very inviting bass to play. It just feels 'right.' While the orientation and spacing of the horns are somewhat reminiscent of a Jazz Bass, the cutouts are further back, towards the bridge, and you hardly realize that this is a 24-fret instrument.

FOCUS, MAN!

The B4's looks reflect a certain degree of vintage styling, but with a modern interpretation. The strong vibrations in the neck hint at great sustain, and the overall look and feel is at least vaguely 'Jazz-like.' But the rubber meets the

road with this third impression: how does it sound? Based upon these visual and tactile impressions, I expected a strong 'vintage meets modern' tone. However, what you get is a bit more like 'vintage meets vintage.' The tone is very much focused in the midrange, and I think that a strong midrange focus is one of those qualities that allows a bass to sit well in a mix. Well, this bass has that in spades, but this comes at the expense of slightly less full deep bass and notably diminished high end extension. This is most notable when making a direct A/B comparison to another bass, so I broke out my trusty '73 Jazz. The B4 is as full as the Jazz in the low end (if not a tad bit more full), but the Jazz had more depth. The B4 was more midrange focused, but in a fairly broad sense, with no severe peaks (or valleys). The Fender was more open sounding in the mids. In the high end department, the Jazz had gobs more high end sparkle and clarity, and the Hen-Bev sounded muted by comparison. Though the deeper cutaways and 24 frets make this less immediately apparent, the location of the pickups on the B4 are markedly closer to the bridge than those of the Jazz (about one inch closer for the neck pickup, and about one-half inch closer for the bridge pickup).

After playing around with the B4 and the Jazz a bit, I decided that another 'classic' comparison might be even more on point, so I dug out my trusty Gibson Thunderbird (a '91 model). This reference was closer to the mark, but even so, obviously divergent from the B4. The T-bird was not only more extended in the lows, but also more crisp on top, with greater high end information. The Thunderbird was more powerful through the low mids, but again, the B4 has the most overall midrange focus. I did notice with both the Jazz and the Thunderbird (which are vol/vol/tone setups, just like the B4) that the Hen-Bev responds more dramatically than the other two when you roll either pickup off a bit, and get it out of humbucking mode. You can definitely steer the tone with the volume knobs, but a little goes a long way with the B4.

3. Dave and Scotty were responsible for making the USA Custom version of the Ibanez ATK series (the modern iteration being reviewed on page XX), and this limited run of basses also featured a stress-free neck.
4. Another benefit is the lifetime warranty against bowing or warping.




Below: The screw in the middle of the right set of 3 is the tilt adjustment control



In addition to the pickup placement, the choice of pickups certainly plays a role in defining this mid-focused tone. At a live performance, I had no problem finding my space in a mix, though I did feel the need to tweak my rig a bit to add some more high end detail. I can't help but wonder how this bass would sound with a pair of Nordstrand Big Singles, or another more pickup with a bit more treble extension. But this is a matter of personal preference, and many players would be inclined to dial out some of the high end that others seek. As it stands, this is a bass that any studio in the land could slot into a mix with ease, and that is definitely to its credit.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The Henman-Bevilacqua B4 is certainly an instrument that makes strong impressions. The styling is uniquely compelling, and the instrument plays like a dream. The construction is top notch, and the stress-free neck design is effective and well thought out. However, I can't help but escape the feeling that a different set of pickups might unleash a boatload of potential. In addition, some players might expect (or want) a preamp in an instrument in this price range (which is considerable). The truth is that this is not a bass that is made for the masses. Rather, the folks at HB are reaching out to artists inspired by a certain mix of style and values. If the tone is up your alley, the playability and consistency will not let you down. And no matter where you go, in the studio or on the stage, you'll be well equipped to lay it down with style. 





HENMAN BEVILACQUA

2008 MODEL B4 BASS

CONFIGURATION

Strings	4
Style	Double cutaway, offset
Overall length	48"
Body dimensions	18.5" tall x 13.5" wide at lower bout
Body contouring	Yes
Weight	9.7 lbs

CONSTRUCTION

Body woods	Ash with Figured Maple tops
Neck woods	Sapelle Mahogany
Fretboard	Ebony
Body finish	Stain and sealer
Neck finish	Stain and sealer

HARDWARE

Strings	Unmarked roundwounds
Gauge	.040, .060, .080, .100
Attachment	Saddles
Bridge/color	Independent bridges, aluminum
Nut	Aluminum
Tuners/color	Sperzel / aluminum
Knobs/color	Machined dome style / aluminum
Pickguard	None
Cover attachments	Screws, threaded inserts

NECK

Scale	34"
Width at nut	1.707"
Width at 12th fret / joint	2.153" / 2.303"
Thickness at nut	.722"
Thickness at 12th / joint	.925" / 1.028"
String spacing at nut	1.71" span, .437" on center
String spacing at saddle	2.058" span, .68" on center
Radius	12"
Shape	C-shaped round
String break nut / bridge	
Afterlength nut / saddle	2" - 5.5" / 2.5"

Attachment	Bolt-on, 5 bolts
Pocket gap	No appreciable gap
Truss rod style / access	Unusual
Fret count	24
Fretwire	108 x 55, bell brass

ELECTRONICS

Pickups	EMG-Hz
Pickup placement	Bridge 2" / Neck 5.5" from bridge
Electronics	Passive
Controls	Volume, volume, tone
Shielding	Shielding paint
Power	NA

GENERAL

Company	Henman-Bevilacqua Guitars
	Malibu, CA 90265
	www.henbev.com
Country of Origin	USA
Warranty	Neck - Lifetime; Electronics - 5 years
Listed Price	\$5,900.00
Street Price	\$4,000.00 to \$4,500.00
Options	None
Accessories	Aluminum case, strap, wrenches.
Price as Tested	\$4,500.00
Available colors	Numerous black shades and white
Available options	Numerous custom choices

CONDITIONS

Acquired from	Henman-Bevilacqua Guitars
Dates	February, March and April, 2008
Locales	Ohio
Test gear	Bergantino IP310, IP153/EX115, AE410/AE210/AE112; Summit Audio TD-100; Kern IP-777; Orange AD200B/Mk3 and OBC-410/OBC-115; SWR Baby Blue II; Fender 800 Pro; George L's, Phil Jones Bass and Fodera cables.

TEST RESULTS

1-5 (unacceptable to impeccable)

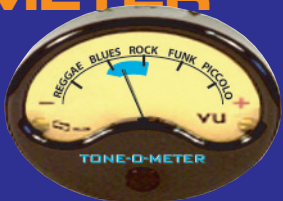
in-hand		on-bench	
Dynamics	3	Overall construction	4
Dead Spots	5	Wood choice	4
String to string balance	4.5	Materials choice	4
Access to upper register	4.5	Joinery	4
Ergonomics	4	Fretwork	5
Left hand feel	4.5	Fit & Finish of adornments	4
Aesthetic appeal	4.5	Quality of finish work	3
Tone (see below)	3	Ease of repair	2
Value	2.5	Potential range of setup	2
		Balance on knee	3
		Balance on strap	3
SONIC PROFILE		Overall electronic quality	2
Lows – reasonably full, but not as ‘deep’ as some		Solder joints, wire runs	4
Mids – solid, even, focused		Clarity	3
midrange		Noise	3
Highs – not very extended, smooth, though somewhat ‘dull’		Shielding	5
		Quality for Price Range	1

IN-HAND SCORE
4.0 AVERAGE

ON-BENCH SCORE
3.3 AVERAGE

TONE-O-METER

Our Henman Bevilacqua B4 test bass exhibited a very solid midrange focus, with a somewhat muted high end.



Henman Bevilacqua B4 Bass 4 string

Seldom does an instrument raise tempers in our shop. The Henman-Bevilacqua bass had everyone arguing for several days. In some ways, this bass is an artistic adaptation of a vintage Fender Jazz Bass. It is a fusion of high-tech mechanical arts with a retro redo of a classic form. It sounds and plays really well. It's got a love it or hate it signature look. It's really expensive. The price point demands a level of craftsmanship and detail that must be able to withstand sharp scrutiny. One should have very high expectations in that price range, and this bass delivers mixed results.

The overall presentation is really just a couple steps away from a Jazz Bass (though as Tom points out, it has a certain 'Gibson vibe' to it as well). It has a similar shape that is slightly undersized from a traditional Jazz bass. They add some contouring on the back under the shortened lower bout horn. It is a lighter bass at 9.7lbs. It appears to be an ash body with a flamed top that was covered by some flat black stain and or paint that almost completely masks the top flame. It looks like the graphite in a pencil. The neck is Sapelle mahogany finished in a similar fashion as the body with an ebony fingerboard. The body finish did have some execution flaws that on lower priced instruments could be excusable but not in this price range.

The neck construction is unusual. It has a peghead, neck and truss bar structure that carries the string tension while the fingerboard floats over top, tension free. The contention is that the uncoupled board increases sustain and resonance. That was one of the many conversations had around our shop. Nobody here is

convinced of that theory. The bass sounds great and does have decent note length. That being said, it is not any better than an NYC Sadowsky, which uses a traditional Fender-style neck and actually costs less money.

The neck is proportioned very close to a vintage Jazz Bass, although it has 24 frets and very large .55 x 108 fretwire. The frets were excellently groomed. The nut width is 1.7" with strings spaced perfectly at .437" on center perfectly executed. The handwork on the bass outside of the finish defects is flawless.

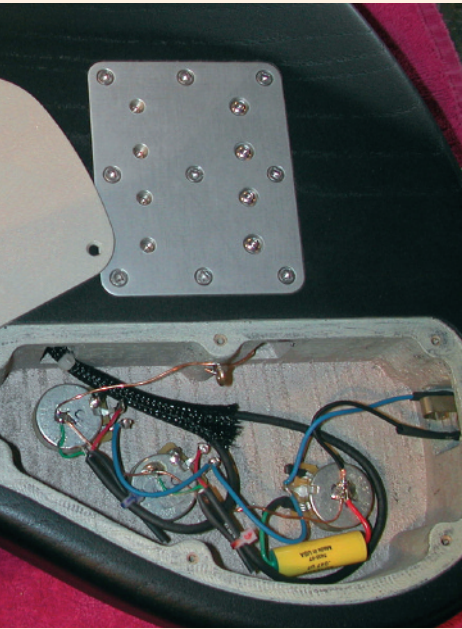
The components and adornments are all aluminum. They make a proprietary aluminum bridge structure similar to a cross between a 2Tec bridge and a single saddle Khaler. The bridge cover and the pickup covers are custom machined aluminum. The keys are Sperzell bodies with custom aluminum H/B engraved heads. The inlays are all aluminum. The combination of the aluminum appointments and graphite looking finish make an austere and retro/modern presentation that you either love or hate. Opinions are mixed on the aesthetics. I like it. Many others think it looks cheap. This bass is a repairman's nightmare as the adjustments to this bass are nontraditional and not obvious even to the experienced eye. Publishing the details on the Internet and including a manual to address this is essential, but at the time of review I was left to just guess.² Thankfully, the bass played very well and I didn't feel the need to touch a thing.

The electronics are EMG Hz passive humbuckers with traditional passive Jazz Bass wiring. The control cavity is properly shielded and the wiring perfectly executed. This setup caused quite a bit of the controversy and actually raised some ire. It's hard to understand why such inexpensive and under-performing electronics would be the preferred choice in one of the most expensive electric basses one can buy. They do sound good in this instrument, though there are so many other choices that could potentially sound better, I can't understand how this choice is justified. The absence of active electronics

is a fine alternative choice for a builder, but may be hard to sell to a client, given the price tag. For that price, one should expect at least a defeatable active system with higher-end transducers, so the player has some options. It could be executed in a way that would not detract from the current presentation.

This controversy underlies the extreme reactions to this bass. On the surface, it appears simple and elegant. Its finish is flat and does not appear to take the same kind of time and energy one would take to do a lacquer finish. The electronics are very austere and the components inexpensive. Although the construction of the neck and the machining of the unique parts have been time consuming and probably cost more than they appear, the overall impression the B4 presents is that you would expect it to come in at a lower price point than the suggested retail of \$5,900.³ You can buy some very nice competing brands for a good bit less coin, and this bears considering. Of course, the styling is unique, and this may sway some prospective buyers.

Overall, this bass is excellent. It plays and sounds very good. Being a vintage instrument guy, I really liked it a lot. It has a vintage sound coupled with a modern/retro look that is pleasing and familiar. It could easily be a professional "go to" bass for those interested in a modern take on familiar turf.



1. This instrument was one of the first 'prototypes', and Henman-Bevilacqua have currently switched to a different finishing process.
2. Scotty has been working on a comprehensive manual, and one will be included with each instrument.
3. Scotty informs me that the 'street price' for a B4 will be more like \$4,000 to \$4,500.